

Testimony: Raised Bill No. 5140

February 16, 2016

An Act Concerning The Use of Therapy Animals to Comfort Children Testifying in Certain Criminal Prosecutions

Hello, Representative Urban, Senator Bartolomeo, Senator Bye, Representative Hampton and members of the Committee on Children. My name is Devon Conover. I live in Windham, CT. In 2009, I retired from the CT Department of Public Health where I was Chief of the Community Based Regulations Section, responsible for the Child Day Care and Youth Camp Licensing Programs. In that role, I was responsible for managing joint investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect in those settings in collaboration with the Department of Children and Families, state and local police departments. I co-authored the protocol used by those departments at that time to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect in those settings. In 2003, I was one of five state managers to receive a Connecticut Distinguished Managerial Service Award.

Today I am testifying in support of H.B. 5140, as a member of Tails of Joy, an organization of volunteers who, with their registered therapy animals, provide animal assisted activities, stress relief, and comfort care to children and adults. I have been volunteering with my registered therapy dogs, Savannah, a golden retriever, and Rosie, a corgi mix rescue, in a variety of settings including licensed skilled nursing facilities, a group home for foster children, libraries, schools, and the University of Connecticut for 9 years in Connecticut, and during the summer, on Prince Edward Island, Canada. The purpose of those visits is to make life more comfortable for individuals, encourage communication, and to help relieve stress. H.B. 5140 would permit a registered therapy animal and it's handler to be present in the room and to sit in close proximity to the a child during the child's testimony in any criminal prosecution of an offense involving assault, sexual assault, or abuse of a child twelve years of age or younger. It is critical that children, who must testify in court (a frightening experience in itself) about terrifying experiences, be as comfortable as possible in order to be able to give the best possible testimony and, in that giving, experience the least amount of additional emotional trauma to themselves. We must make it possible for children to be able to effectively participate in the judicial process without being adversely impacted again by having to relive those events. Being allowed to sit close to a gentle, quiet therapy dog and handler would provide some measure of comfort to a child witness without adversely impacting that testimony. It has been widely documented that petting a therapy dog can help to lower a person's blood pressure and relieve stress.

I hope you will act favorably on this proposed bill.

Devon Conover, MS

Tails of Joy Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.) Program Coordinator

Member, Tails of Joy Animal Assisted Crisis Response Team

Registered Pet Partner, Registered R.E.A.D. Team (Intermountain Therapy Animals)